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# From Salonika to America and Back

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**FROM SALONIKA TO AMERICA AND BACK**

DEVIN E. NAAR

My grandfather, whom I call *Nono*, never saw a *matzoh* ball until he came to America. Born in Salonika, Greece, rather than in an Eastern European *shtetl*, he spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), not Yiddish. He was, in short, not “Jewish” as typically conceptualized in the United States—and even the most recent works on Jews in America, such as those by Sarna (2004) and Diner (2004), fail to give these Ladino-speaking Jews due attention. Likewise, where I grew up, *Nono*’s world had been as foreign to me as in these two books except for the glimpses of the language, culture, and customs I caught during my trips to Florida, to visit *Nono* and his siblings. My fascination with their distinctive identity has inspired me to collect books about the experience of Sephardic Jews in an attempt to recreate in my imagination the world in which my ancestors lived.

I discovered my first books on this topic on a warm winter evening in Florida several years ago while exploring a dusty closet in my great uncle’s home. In a box in the corner, I stumbled upon several books that would become the core of my collection. The box contained the remaining possessions of my great grandfather, who served as a rabbi and scribe in Salonika and subsequently in New York and New Jersey. When he, along with his wife, mother, and nine of his ten children (including my grandfather), traversed the Atlantic from Salonika to America in 1924, just weeks before the Immigration Restriction Act came into effect, he brought with him few possessions. What remained in the closet in Florida represented the legacy of my great grandfather transplanted from the old world to the new.

Most of these books were written in Ladino—a language then that was as Greek to me as Greek itself—although, ironically, my great grandfather, like other Jews in Salonika, spoke and read both with ease. The *Meam Loez*, of which there were two copies published in Salonika

during the nineteenth century, epitomizes the literature of the Sephardic Jews since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. This book, written in Ladino, is an encyclopedic commentary on the Torah (the Old Testament) and has served as one of the major sources for rabbinical understanding in the Sephardic world from its first publication well into the twentieth century. A copy of another book, the *Pele Yoetz*, which sat in the box underneath both copies of the *Meam Loez*, is of particular interest because on the front cover, the name and title of the owner, my great grandfather, Benyamin Haim Naar *Sofer* (scribe), is inscribed in Hebrew letters. On the back, the year according to the Hebrew calendar, 5660 (1900), marks the date when my great grandfather obtained the book. He was twenty years old then, just a hair younger than I am today. And on the cover page, in pencil, my great grandfather signed his name in the Hebrew script particular to the Sephardic Jews of the Eastern Mediterranean.

*Pele Yoetz*, signifying “miraculous advisor,” provides a variety of messianic and kabbalistic teachings; the title page guarantees that the reader, *en todos sus etchos i kareras, prospera* (in all of his business dealings and decisions, will prosper). My great grandfather, as an authentic kabbalist—a far cry from the Madonnas and Demi Moores of today—indubitably appealed to the *Pele Yoetz* to address otherwise unanswerable questions. This leads to what may be considered the rarest—in fact, one-of-a-kind—book in the collection: my great grandfather’s unpublished, hand-written workbook of kabbalistic charms, angelic writings, templates for *kemeyot* (talismans) and *gematria* (numerology). One passage, for example, written in Ladino, provides instructions on determining whether a woman is pregnant, how to take revenge on one’s enemy, how to ensure a woman will give birth to a son, and how to determine the cause of one’s illness (whether it be the *ayn ara* [evil eye], the *ruah raa* [evil wind], *shedim* [demons], etc.).

To place these old Ladino and Hebrew writings in a historical context, I subsequently purchased a variety of memoirs and scholarly works regarding the Sephardic experience. Only within the last several years has material on the Sephardic experience in Salonika and elsewhere readily become available. To my delight, the cover of one book I purchased, *The Jews of New*

*Jersey* (2002), prominently displays a picture of my great grandfather's two brothers and their store in New Jersey just after they had emigrated from Salonika. A picture of my great grandfather and family (including my *Nono*), which is also displayed on the mantle at my parents' home, can be found in the book, as well (p. 52). On a broader level, Leon Sciaky's memoir, *Farewell to Salonika* (1946; reprinted 2003), for example, paints a vivid picture of Salonika during the early twentieth century, caught at the crossroads between east and west, where the Jewish majority prospered under the autonomy granted by the Ottoman sultan. This would soon be replaced by the nationalist and nationalizing modern Greek state, which sought to make all of its inhabitants, including the Jews, Greek. Sciaky's story, like *Nono*'s, is one of an immigrant who escaped Salonika and came to the United States; in this sense, reading Sciaky's account best approximates the experience of my *Nono*. Testimonies found in other books I have collected such as *A Greek Jew from Salonika Remembers* (1993), *The House by the Sea: A Portrait of the Holocaust in Greece* (1998), *The Holocaust in Salonika: Eyewitness Accounts* (2002), *Los Sefardies y el Holocausto* [The Sephardic Jews and the Holocaust] (2003), and *A Liter of Soup and Sixty Grams of Bread* (2003) represent some of the recently available first-hand accounts of the destruction of the Jewish community of Salonika by the Nazis.

Scholarly works I have collected, such as those by Rodrigue (2003) and Benbassa (2000), Mazower (2004), Bunis (1999), Esther Juhasz (1990), Papo (1987), Angel (1982), Stein (2004), and others listed in the bibliography, provide further historical context from which a coherent, complex picture of the experience of the Sephardic Jews can be formed. And lastly, but equally as importantly, the books by contemporaries of my great grandfather, Joseph Nehama (1978) and Michael Molho (1988), which I obtained last summer upon my first visit to Salonika, represent the earlier attempts to reconstruct a historical narrative of the Jewish community of Salonika, both before and after the Holocaust.

The Jewish community of Salonika, which numbered ninety thousand in 1900, the year my great grandfather obtained his copy of *Pele Yoetz*, numbers less than one thousand today.

Ninety-six percent of the Jews who stayed in Salonika perished at the hands of the Nazis in 1943. My grandfather's oldest brother, the only sibling who remained in Salonika in favor of immigrating to the United States, met his fate at Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with his wife and two children, my second cousins. In a sense, my collection of books is a tribute to them, to all the victims of the Nazi genocide, and to the world of the Sephardic Jews, once so prosperous and now irrevocably lost.

Not only has my book collection helped me recreate a sense of the world of my *Nono* and his parents, and their parents—for generations—since 1537, when the first Naar came from Spain via Portugal to Salonika, but they also have inspired me to dig beneath the surface and to challenge my understandings about what it means to be “Jewish.” With the aid of dictionaries by Bunis (1993) and Kohen and Kohen (2000), and building on my knowledge of modern Spanish and Hebrew, I in fact have taught myself how to read Ladino. Furthermore, these books have catapulted me on a career path as a historian of modern Jewish history, with a focus on the Sephardic experience, which I will be pursuing during my PhD studies at Stanford under the guidance of Professor Aron Rodrigue, author of several of the books that have greatly influenced me. But first, next year, I will be in Salonika as a Fulbright scholar, studying the Ladino archives that remain in the city, and also learning Greek. Hopefully by then, if Ladino and Greek are still “Greek to me,” that will no longer pose much of a problem.

## FROM SALONIKA TO AMERICA AND BACK

DEVIN NAAR

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<sup>1</sup> All of these old books are safely stored in my parents' home in New Jersey. I have submitted copies of the title pages of these volumes, as well as an entire reproduction of the untitled work by Benjamin Haim Naar. Upon request, and if need be, I can work on having the original volumes shipped here to St. Louis.

<sup>2</sup> Indicates that said volume has been submitted as sampling of collection.

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